

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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 HD **Put down your phones. Social media isn't helping our political discourse; During a federal election campaign, there has never been a golden era of good faith. But now Twitter has combined misinformation and tribalism to create a brain-destroying admixture**
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Like most of you, I'm deeply indebted to social media. Without my various feeds, how would I know that a heroic Belgian motorcyclist had rescued a kitten from the middle of the motorway? How would I discover the correct opinion about the ending of Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, or which miracle unguent will erase my wrinkles overnight? These are indispensable elements for modern living.

Not during a federal election, though. During an election, social media becomes a hotbed of lunacy, a playground for trolls and meme-makers and politicians with itchy Twitter fingers. We should all get off it, now – voters and politicians alike. There is no one who has put down her phone after a half-hour on Twitter and said, "I feel one step closer to enlightenment! Thanks for that engaging policy debate, Libtard45329."

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The election hasn't even officially begun, and yet the discourse on social media has fallen from its usual sub-basement level to Parking Level Z. I imagine aliens arriving in our country, having been told that Canada is the home of peace, order and good government, taking one look online, and returning to the interstellar gas station to give back their map. "No, Zog, sorry, we couldn't find any intelligent life there, just a lot of people screaming about something called a hashtag."

I know elections are traditionally times of deviousness and dirty fighting; I'm old enough to remember the Progressive Conservatives' ad that was criticized for mocking Jean Chrétien's face. There was no golden age, and yet, we have now entered a zinc era in which bad faith, misinformation and tribalism have combined in a brain-destroying admixture. What's worse, online is where we increasingly gather, rather than in the spaces where we might have to look each other in the eye – at debates, candidates' meetings, on the doorstep.

I don't think any of us envisioned the digital utopia involving the middle-aged leader of a poll-trailing, far-right political party using his platform to gain attention by attacking a 16-year-old girl. But that's exactly what Maxime Bernier did this week when he took to Twitter to call the climate activist Greta Thunberg "[mentally unstable](#)," alongside a host of other put-downs. Except it all backfired on the leader of the People's Party of Canada: What he described weren't put-downs, they were human qualities that Ms. Thunberg has struggled with and overcome. Ms. Thunberg will be remembered as a global hero, while Mr. Bernier will be lucky to be remembered at all.

But that's just the loopier fringes of the Canadian political debate: What's happening in the centre ring? Oh wait, it's even more ludicrous and chaotic. Cover your eyes, children. Here we have Andrew Scheer, the leader of the Conservative Party, [posting](#) a discredited story about the possibility of a child murderer being

granted asylum in Canada, based on the sterling, impeccable [reporting](#) of ... The Daily Mail. Yes, that Daily Mail, august chronicler of pert bottoms, immigrant paranoia and the many ways your lunch will give you cancer. It was a spurious story intended to embarrass the Liberals and kick up dust to obscure more important issues. In that, it succeeded, and left us all with a handful fewer brain cells.

Because this is equal-opportunity madness, Mr. Scheer's opponents have also spread misinformation. When his team posted an innocuous video of the Conservative Leader meeting a woman named Adina on the streets of Toronto, a Twitter account called Alberta Resistance uncovered what it [considered](#) a conspiracy. The woman in the video was actually an actor, it claimed. It named the actor, who was then subject to [online harassment](#). Except none of it was true: The actor was not the woman in the video. The original conspiracy tweet was deleted and a couple of high-profile Scheer opponents who retweeted it apologized, although they should have known better in the first place. The story was already out there, leaving a malicious doubt-trail in its wake.

At one point, politicians saw social media as a direct line to the voter, a wonderful way to bypass the inconvenient questions of the media. That was before the lying memes and the schoolyard name-calling, the sexist and racist insults. Online conversation was supposed to augment the real-life campaign, but now it seems to have supplanted it. The controversies that arise online obscure real, substantive policy issues, and the truncated format cuts off dialogue instead of enabling it. We fail to recognize the staggering influence of online persuasion at our peril, as The New York Times recently revealed in an [investigation](#) of YouTube's role in the rise of the far-right in Brazil.

Canadians have said they're worried about the spread of misinformation in the coming election campaign, most recently this week in a [poll](#) from Simon Fraser University. Canada's security agencies have [warned](#) about outside interference in the campaign. The government has implemented [plans](#) to clamp down on possible malfeasance. But who protects from ourselves, from our own rash decision-making? To paraphrase Shakespeare, the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are dingbats.

We could try to fight these tendencies. We could open the door when a canvasser rings the bell, instead of cowering in the kitchen pretending not to be home. We could go to an all-candidates meeting. We could watch the debates. We could read the flyers they stick in our mailboxes, instead of using them as bookmarks. We could watch documentaries such as Netflix's [The Great Hack](#), which demonstrates the ways that social-media platforms and private data are used by campaigns. We could participate in exercises in civic transparency, such as the [Political Ad Collector](#) analysis that The Globe and Mail is helping run to identify targeted ads on Facebook.

Most of all, we might look away from our phones for the duration of the campaign – or at least limit interaction to content featuring small animals and large cakes. Perhaps all of us, voter and politician alike, could follow the advice of carpenters: Measure twice, cut once. Or in this case, think twice, post not at all.

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